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By Douglas Roche

What do Mary Robinson, Jimmy Carter, Ban Ki-moon, Juan Manuel Santos, and Zeid Raad Hussein have in common? They are all members of the Elders, an independent group of former global leaders using their experience to press today's governments to smarten up on peace, justice and human rights.

Of course, being experienced statespersons, they use diplomatic language as they cajole modern leaders to step up ethical leadership to deal with the great moral crises of the coronavirus, climate change and nuclear weapons. During a series of webinars last week (ed: July 12-16), they pleaded for stronger political leadership to protect human rights and international law against the new populists who want to tear down the institutions built after World War II.

Founded in 2007 by Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid hero who became President of South Africa and Nobel Peace laureate, the Elders is composed of about two dozen men and women who have held high office and are now "free from any vested personal interest." In other words, they are unchained from the party machinery that brought them to a top job in the first place. Mandela said: "Together they will support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict and inspire hope where there is despair." Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter joined right away. The late U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan was an early member.

The Elders don't just talk platitudes. They use their access to present leaders to dive into the hot issues: they have called for fairness for the Palestinians, universal health coverage, protection of refugees, a reformed U.N., and equality for women and girls in every country. They've sent delegations to Iran, Israel and Palestine, Myanmar and Zimbabwe. Their London-based headquarters is well funded

by a dozen big philanthropists headed by Richard Branson, the billionaire who recently rocketed to the edge of space as the first space tourist.

The Elders is now headed by Mary Robinson, first woman President of Ireland and a passionate advocate for gender equality, women's participation in peace-building, human dignity and climate justice. Juan Manuel Santos, former President of Colombia and also a Nobel Peace laureate, former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Zeid Raad Hussein, a Jordanian diplomat who became U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, joined Robinson in the webinar series, "The State of Hope." They all pointed to the new opportunities for peace and human security opened up by the effects of COVID-19. The coronavirus, they said, has made everyone realize we can't solve human security problems by only national means; leaders today must "break loose from old thinking" and establish broader coalitions.

They made their point by releasing an Internet poll taken by the Elders, which showed that 83 percent of respondents think that climate change and economic and social inequalities are the biggest challenges now facing the world. And 55 percent of respondents think that lack of trust in world leaders cooperating for peace is the biggest impediment facing the COVID-19 recovery.

The Elders' work revolves around a central theme: international cooperation. Robinson drives home the point: "An effective, rules-based multilateral system is the world's insurance policy against existential threats from pandemics to climate change and nuclear weapons, and we now know the awful cost of failing to provide comprehensive cover."

These experienced statespersons acknowledge that the network of international covenants and institutions agreed and constructed since the end of the Second World War, with the U.N. at its core, is far from perfect. But it has nevertheless decisively supported the pursuit of peace, security and the protection of human rights, as well as economic and social improvements around the globe for

seven decades. They wonder aloud if the Biden administration in the U.S. will be able to overcome the deliberate damage done to multilateralism by the Trump years.

“In an age of growing nationalism, populism and isolationism, it is all too easy for leaders and citizens to resort instead to seemingly simple solutions and scapegoats,” the group said in its most recent report. Looking to the future, they call for flexibility, not assuming that arrangements shaped 75 years ago as the Second World War drew to a close should be preserved intact in their present form for perpetuity.

This is precisely the point made by *The Economist* magazine in a recent edition (ed: July3-9): even before the coronavirus came along, the world was entering uncharted waters through the digital revolution, climate change and the rise of China. All this is a huge challenge to the existing international institutions. As countries adapt to a post COVID-19 world, innovative responses to the crisis of common survival will be essential.

The Elders may be grey on top, but they seem to have the energy of youth in tackling the new agenda.

Incidentally, I looked for the names of former Canadian leaders in the Elders’ roster. There aren’t any. Joe Clark, Brian Mulroney, Jean Chretien, Paul Martin, Steven Harper: where are you?

Former Senator Douglas Roche’s latest book is *Recovery: Peace Prospects in the Biden Era*.

